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SUBJECT: IN WAKE OF ATTACKS, ANBAR GOVERNMENT SIDESTEPS
CONFLICT WITH CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

REF: BAGHDAD 03378

Classified By: OPA Director Greta Holtz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Anbar (Ramadi) cable.

¶2. (S) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: The December 30 attacks against the Provincial Government Center in Anbar resulted in the resignation of the Provincial Chief of Police. The direct involvement of Prime Minister Maliki and Sahwa party head Sheikh Ahmed abu Risha in the Interior Ministry's choice of interim chief may signal an effort by Maliki to use the issue to split an opposing coalition before the election. This decision threatened to exacerbate tensions between the provincial and central governments, but for the moment Anbar's provincial council has sidestepped a confrontation by accepting Maliki's decision. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

SAHWA CHIEF PRESSES FOR RESIGNATION OF POLICE CHIEF

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¶3. (S) PRTOffs at the scene of the December 30 attack on Anbar's Provincial Government Center (PGC) in Ramadi (reftel) related that one of the first acts of the Provincial Council (PC) was to quickly press for the removal of the controversial provincial chief of police, Major General Yousef Mohammed Tariq, from his position. Although given the opportunity to resign, MG Tariq initially refused. In response, Sahwa al-Iraq party secretary Sheikh Ahmed abu Risha phoned Minister of Interior (MoI) Jawad al-Bulani in Baghdad and pressed him to replace MG Tariq. While resisting at first, offering instead to investigate MG Tariq's performance, al-Bulani eventually relented and agreed to remove him. At the same time, Sheikh Ahmed pressed for al-Bulani to name Tariq's deputy, Brigadier General Muhammad Rashid, as his interim successor. Sheikh Ahmad promised he would ensure the PC would uphold the MoI's recommendation. Al-Bulani then issued orders for Rashid's appointment as the interim police chief. Sheikh Ahmed also secured a similar promise from the PC Chair, Dr. Jassim Mohammad al-Halbusi, that the PC would support BG Muhammad as interim police chief.

THE PRIME MINISTER WEIGHS IN

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¶4. (S) Then, on January 2, Prime Minister Maliki directly appointed Brigadier General Baha Hussein al-Karki, a Sunni Army officer from the Adhamiyah suburb of Baghdad, as the interim police chief, and sent him to Ramadi to assume command. PC Chair Jassim, after promising Sheikh Ahmed that he would ensure PC support for BG Muhammad, stated that he and the PC would not support BG Baha if he came to Ramadi. The next day Dr. Jassim traveled to Baghdad to meet with the Prime Minister and express his concerns about the appointment. (COMMENT: The most likely source of rejection by the Anbaris is their unwillingness to accept a non-Anbari as police chief, viewing it as a possible central government "takeover" over the province. END COMMENT.)

IIP PROTESTS RATTLE GOVERNMENT

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15. (SBU) On the same day that Maliki moved to place his own pick in the police chief billet, opposition figures in Anbar, including Minister of Parliament Ahmed Alwani and members of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), staged a protest against Sheikh Ahmed, Sahwa, and the provincial government. Standing outside the PGC, the group called for the popular election of the police chief and delivered a letter to Deputy Prime Minister Issawi, who was meeting with PC Chair Jassim at the PGC, asserting that the people of Anbar wanted another candidate, Brigadier General Hussein Alwani of the Alwan tribe (a tribe believed to be largely aligned with the IIP), Qtribe (a tribe believed to be largely aligned with the IIP), to be police chief. The demonstrators went on to call for the reinstatement of the former IIP provincial governor, Ma'moun Sami Rashid al-Ulwani, also an Alwan native, who took office following the 2005 elections. They also called for the dissolution of the entire PC, denouncing it as a tool of Sheikh Ahmed and the Sahwa movement. (COMMENT: Further demonstrations were planned but later cancelled, and none of the IIP's demands appear to have any legal basis or are likely to gain traction among the wider Anbari public. Nevertheless, the demonstrations have rattled the government, with PC Chair Jassim saying the actions amounted to a coup d'etat. END COMMENT.)

SURPRISE TURN: PC EMBRACES MALIKI'S PICK

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16. (U) On January 4, PRTOff attended the Anbar Operations Command (AOC) meeting. PC Chair Jassim, the Iraqi Army AOC commander Major General Abd al Aziz Muhammad Jasim, BG Baha,

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and BG Mohammad were all in attendance. Previous statements by Dr. Jassim indicating he and the PC would reject BG Baha's appointment led to anticipation of a contentious meeting that would signal a new row with Baghdad. To the surprise of many, Dr. Jassim proclaimed acceptance and support for BG Baha, and admonished the provincial government and security agencies to do the same, characterizing him as a "capable and competent soldier and a loyal Iraqi". The PC Chair went on to suggest that the provincial government's efforts should be focused on the selection of the permanent police chief, rather than on fighting over the temporary one.

COMMENT: CRISIS AVERTED) FOR NOW

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17. (C) While IIP efforts may only serve to create temporary confusion, Prime Minister Maliki's direct intervention in the choice of interim police chief had the potential to drive a wedge between the two Iraqi Unity Alliance (IUA) coalition partners, and presented a particular problem for his cabinet member and political challenger (and IUA leader), Interior Minister al-Bulani. By selecting a non-Anbari Army officer, and overriding an apparent deal between running mates Sheikh Ahmed and al-Bulani, Maliki appears to have been trying to precipitate a confrontation between them.

18. (C) The provincial government's surprise move to embrace BG Baha has had two positive effects. First, it neutralized an apparent attempt by Maliki to split the IUA by pitting Sheikh Ahmed against Minister al-Bulani. Second, by moving the government past the issue and focusing on the permanent police chief, Dr. Jassim has ensured continuity of leadership on security issues in the province at a particularly sensitive time following the December 30 attacks. In taking these actions, the provincial government officials positioned themselves as statesmen looking after the best interests of the province, rather than as reactive and suspicious bureaucrats or, at worst, political opportunists out to exploit a tragedy.

19. (C) Nevertheless, the appointment of a non-Anbari Iraqi Army general to the Anbar police chief position is likely to

reinforce pre-election anxieties among Anbaris that the central government, often derided in Anbar as an "agent of Iran," is staging a slow takeover of the province. These anxieties were heightened in the last few months over perceived efforts by MG Aziz and the Iraqi Army in Anbar to assume greater control of security within Anbari cities.

These tensions only began to subside recently with an agreement between Governor Qassim and MG Aziz last month that delineated the specific roles of the Iraqi Army and police in Anbar, keeping the Iraqi Army out of the cities except in emergencies or specific operations. This issue is likely to persist, in spite of these recent actions by the provincial government to sidestep this latest potential conflict with Baghdad.

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